

The Builder.

No. CCLXV.

SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 1848.



ARNESTLY desiring to interest the people in matters of art, and to obtain for art and artists an appreciating and sympathising public, without which real advance cannot be hoped for, we have ever viewed the ART-UNION OF LONDON, as amongst the most important institutions of the metropolis, and have watched its progress with great and increasing interest. This interest has been the greater, too, because of the extraordinary, if not wilful blindness with which the real tendency and positive results of this association have been overlooked by some, who are themselves urging the importance of making art enter into the every-day life of the people, and maintaining, with truth, that until the public be familiarised with art, we must not look for that general discriminative knowledge which must form the ground-work of a progress worthy to be called national. The great object of the half-dozen men who sat down eleven years ago to organise the Art-Union, was to spread abroad a knowledge and love of art amongst the masses. They did not speak primarily of the advancement of art, or the advantage of artists, knowing full well that these must inevitably follow the attainment of their object. Success has attended their efforts—success of the most extraordinary kind,—success far beyond what could have been anticipated by the warmest friends of the undertaking.

Public feeling in respect of matters of art has been greatly changed since the Art-Union began its work. If proof be needed, look into our shops; look into the newspapers; or listen to the debates in Parliament when art is involved in the discussion, and remember what would have been found in either of those cases only eleven years ago. There can be no question, as the Committee of the House of Commons say in their report on the subject, that "Art-Unions have largely contributed to interest, at home and in the colonies, a great portion of the educated classes in the nature and advancement of the fine arts. Were there even for a time to prevail an inferior description of production, with all the faults, both in subject and execution, ascribed to it, it must be remembered that the main point will still have been attained, the excitement and preparation for a new intellectual enjoyment, to which, till lately, the large majority, even of the educated public, were strangers." Moreover, it is not too much to assert that but for the establishment of the Art-Union of London in 1837, the Royal Commission of Fine Arts would not have been issued in 1841.

Feeling thus, we heard with much disquietude of a threatened, most uncalled for, and injudicious interference with the constitution of the Art-Union of London by the Board of Trade, likely to interfere seriously with its success, and we briefly protested against it some weeks ago.

Anxiety has been manifested by many of our readers to know the nature of the correspondence which has passed, and the precise

state of affairs at this moment, and we are glad now to be able to comply with their request.

The first letter from the Board of Trade, dated October 6th, 1847, was addressed by Mr. John Lefevre to the honorary secretary, and stated that their lordships were about to issue certain general rules for the guidance of Art-Unions, and before doing so thought it "right to communicate to the committee of the London Art-Union the general results of their deliberation, both on account of the practical suggestions which they hope to receive from them, and because of the important effects which the alterations they consider to be requisite in the present English system may have upon the constitution and proceedings of that society."

The most important question raised was as to the mode of selecting the prizes, and after discussing the two systems, namely, 1, which gives the right of selection to the prizeholder, and 2, which intrusts it to a committee, and assigns to the prizeholder not a right of choice, but a particular work of art,—the letter goes on to say that their lordships decidedly preferred the latter:—

"As, however, my lords are sensible of the inconvenience attending a system which wholly excludes the prizeholder from any right of choice whatever, they are desirous to recommend a plan which endeavours to combine the advantages of both principles, rather than to insist upon the unqualified adoption of that pursued in Scotland and in Ireland. It appears to them that it would be desirable that the committee should, in the first instance, select the whole number of works of art from which the prizes should be taken, but that the prizes should consist, not of particular works, but of rights to a first, second, third, or later choice, from among the collection thus made; so that the prizeholder would have the opportunity of exercising his own taste and judgment, and would be able to choose such a work as was suitable to his wishes, while his choice would be confined to works of real merit, and would be exercised in a manner the most likely to lead him unbiased by other influences than those of his own genuine taste. My lords cannot anticipate that the adoption of this system would be unpopular among the subscribers to unions, at present conducted on the principle of selection by the prizeholder: but should the committee of the London Art-Union see reason for apprehending that a sudden alteration of this kind would have the effect of causing any considerable decline in the number of the members of that society, my lords would have no objection to its gradual introduction, which they conceive might easily be effected, by confiding to the committee the office of selecting one-third of the prizes in the first year, two-thirds in the second, and the whole in the third year, thus affording an opportunity for observing the working of the system."

"The question which stands next in importance to that respecting the selection of prizes, relates to the distribution of engravings. My lords are of opinion that it is highly desirable, both to give encouragement to the art of engraving, and also, by means of the facilities which it affords, to diffuse among the public at large, a knowledge of some of those great works with which they have no other opportunity of becoming acquainted. They doubt, however, whether the system at present adopted is calculated to secure either of those ends; and they desire to see the practice of an annual distribution of engravings from modern pictures altogether abandoned. They consider that it would be more for the benefit of the art of engraving, and more valuable for the education of the public, were commissions to be from time to time given to first-rate artists for engravings of a very superior character. These would, of course, be too costly for general distribution, but the proofs might be allotted as prizes among the subscribers, and the prints might be disposed of by the committee for the benefit of the

society, perhaps giving the subscribers some advantages in point of price."

Besides these two fundamental points, the selection of prizes, and the distribution of engravings, the letter sets forth that their lordships proposed to require that 10 per cent. should be set apart out of the receipts of the Art-Union for the purchase of works of art, not for distribution, but for public exhibition.

The council of the Art-Union, after due deliberation, directed a reply to be forwarded, dated October 25, of which the following are the more material portions:—

"The first and most important part of the communication refers to the principle upon which the prizes are to be distributed; it sets forth that, 'My lords prefer the principle of selection by a committee, although they recognise the advantages attending a selection by the prizeholder,' and it recommends a plan supposed to combine the good points of both."

If their lordships simply intend this as a recommendation, the council have to state, that the best mode of distribution has been a subject of frequent consideration during the last ten years, and that the plan proposed has, amongst others, been carefully considered by them. At the present moment, however, they are satisfied that the mode now adopted is the more advantageous, and, in the words of their last report to the subscribers, to which they are pledged by the unanimous expression of a general meeting, they 'would greatly deplore such a change, and furthermore, would consider it their duty to oppose it by every means in their power, as being calculated not merely to lessen the good effects of the association, but ultimately to destroy it altogether, and to do great injury to art and artists. The council are confirmed by experience in the opinion already expressed by them on other occasions, that by placing the selection in the hands of the prizeholders themselves, much good is done. Great additional interest in the subject is excited, personal inquiry and examination are induced, comparison between works is instituted, and knowledge obtained which is spread throughout their several circles. In this way, too, all classes of art-works find a market; whereas, were the selections all made by the same five or six individuals, a bias would exist, even with the best intentions, towards works of some particular character and style, to say nothing of the possibility of personal favouritism, and thus injury would be done to other classes of art. Moreover, allowing the prizeholders to select, is so much more popular than the contrary course would be, that the change could not fail to lessen the number of subscribers most materially, thus interfering with one great object of the society, that of interesting the masses in matters of art, and affording them the means of enjoying it."

Further, the council of the Art-Union are not prepared to admit the advantage of being able to forestall private purchasers by visits to the studio; or that a gambling spirit is induced by the present mode which would be prevented by the change.

If, on the other hand, the communication goes beyond a recommendation, and, as may be inferred from it, their lordships consider the determination of the mode of selecting the prizes, 'one of the rules of a general character which the Privy Council may hereafter impose,' in accordance with 'a provision (said to be) contained in the charter of the Art-Union of London,'—and that the change recommended is to be enforced by one of the rules which their lordships are about to issue, the council consider it their duty, without meaning the slightest disrespect, to point their lordships' attention to the following reason, why such rule would not be binding on the Art-Union of London.

The Act 9 and 10 Vict. c. 47, separately refers to two sorts of associations under the name of Art-Unions, viz.—1. Those for the purchase of works of art to be afterwards distributed by lot amongst the subscribers; and 2. Those for the allotment to the subscribers of the right of purchasing for themselves works of art of certain value; and the Act provides that all such associations shall be